



March 2, 2015

Dear Senator Bye, Representative Walker and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

**Officers**

Kathleen Krolak  
President

Peter Troiano  
VP, Governance  
Secretary

Gerald Whitaker  
Treasurer

**Directors**

Lisa Brandes

Gabriel DaSilva

Eric Epstein

Sharon Lovett-Graff

Susan McCaslin

Robert Pellegrino

Helen Rosenberg

Jane Snaider

Mike Storz

**Staff**

Chris Heitmann  
Executive Director

Mistina Hanscom  
Event & Volunteer  
Coordinator

Noe Jimenez  
Communications  
Associate

Mike Crotta  
Maintenance

Thank you all for your service during this challenging budget cycle and for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding Governor Malloy's FY15-16 Biennial Budget.

I am writing today to advocate for restoration of funds to the Main Street Initiatives line item within DECD. Our organization, the Westville Village Renaissance Alliance (WVRA), relies on these funds for nearly 50% of both our operating budget and our economic revitalization programs. Elimination of funding would have a significantly negative impact on our efforts to foster and sustain economic revitalization, community engagement and cultural vitality in Westville Village and the surrounding neighborhoods of New Haven.

Founded as a grass-roots group of residents, artists and small business owners in 1999 with a focus on revitalizing a much-blighted neighborhood commercial district, WVRA has evolved into a designated Connecticut Main Street program and the lynchpin of economic recovery in the district.

Over the past four years alone, our programs have leveraged DECD funding to reap the following reinvestments in the district:

- \$2.6 mil. in private construction and renovations, including façade work and energy efficiency upgrades, keeping local contractors at work and boosting property values;
- \$1.1 mil. in public improvements, including sidewalk reconstruction, pedestrian signals and public parking upgrades, improving walkability and accessibility for residents, visitors and businesses alike;
- A net gain of 12 new businesses, 44 full-time jobs, and nearly 400 part-time jobs;
- 72 public events, a year-round effort that has attracted over 55,000 visitors;
- 7,700 volunteer hours in service of our programs; and
- Additional funding and support from over 250 individual, business and institutional members and partners.

Despite this success, and a healthy and growing base of over 70 small businesses and over 1,000 full and part-time jobs, we are at a critical juncture in our efforts. Last summer, a five-alarm fire devastated one of our local restaurants, Delaney's, which had been a long-time economic, social and physical anchor of the district. Over 30 full-time jobs were lost, 10 residents displaced and the social heart of a neighborhood destroyed. During this crisis, WVRA played a central and on-the-ground role liaising between the City, utility companies and local businesses to minimize traffic, utility and business interruptions.

Moving forward, the economics of rebuilding a mixed-use structure of this size are challenging at best, but we have been working directly with the property and business

owners to strategize and leverage public and private funds to maximum effect. A few months after the fire, First Niagara Bank pulled out of the neighborhood (as they seem to be doing throughout the state), closing our local branch and leaving another keystone property in the district empty. These are losses that require significant efforts to recover from.

One major component of our response is to develop a comprehensive plan for the Main Street district, focused on land-use and zoning recommendations and economic feasibility analyses for a variety of mixed-use development. However, coordination of this planning effort, improvements to walkability via three planned traffic-calming projects in the next two years, and the many other moving pieces of comprehensive downtown revitalization all require intense management and strong partnerships. This is a role that we are experienced, effective, and efficient at – and uniquely positioned to conduct – and we ask that you support our efforts to continue this work through the Main Street Initiatives funding.

WVRA staff, volunteers, partners and other stakeholders have made noticeable gains over the past few years, but there is so much more to accomplish to ensure a healthy, safe and vibrant Westville Village and west side of New Haven.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Chris Heitmann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chris Heitmann  
Executive Director